

Lesson One: A Biblical Introduction to Evil, Tribulation, and Suffering

Lesson Introduction

This course is primarily meant to be a study through the epistle of 1 Peter, the theme of which concerns trials, suffering and persecution. As a prelude to our study of 1 Peter, this lesson is intended to provide the necessary theological foundation by exploring the problem of evil and suffering in general. There are important questions we all have, such as why evil and suffering exist. Are these the result of Satan's activity? If so, where did he come from and why did God allow him to be part of His creation? Finally, when evil leads to persecution because of our faith in Christ, how does this affect our commitment to discipleship?

Lesson Outline

- Topic 1: The Problem of Evil and Suffering
- Topic 2: The Origin of Evil in Satan's Rebellion
- Topic 3: Job: An Early Suffering Saint of God
- Topic 4: Persecution and the Challenge of Discipleship

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to do the following:

- List and describe four types of suffering that mankind experiences.
- Explain why God has chosen to allow evil to exist in His creation.
- Understand how Satan became an *evil angelic being* and what role he has in propagating evil.
- Identify with Job's longing for an explanation to his suffering and how he had to learn to trust God even when he did not have his questions answered.
- Apply Jesus' teaching on persecution and discipleship to your own life.

Topic 1: The Problem of Evil and Suffering

If the God of the Bible is inherently a good God, and if He has unlimited power, then the question naturally arises: Why does God not use His power to eradicate all forms of evil and suffering, especially for His children who have put their trust in Him? Such questions pose a dilemma for our human minds as we try to reconcile what we think we know of God with what we observe in the world around us. Consider the following sad experience of a Christian couple from the Middle East.



A Testimony from the Middle East

The following is one couple's story of how they suffered when the radical followers of ISIS invaded their city and persecuted the people living there, especially the Christians.

Trying to remember and write one of life's worst experiences is not easy. War is the worst experience that someone wants to be reminded of. War is one of the worst things that can happen to people. It's all about loss. You lose joy, peace, belongings, family members, and the comfort of home. Even memories are scattered all around with nothing left to cling to.

Our family had been living in our country in the Middle East since our marriage in 1991 until the year 2011. Then chaos started spreading all over the country and reached our city in July 2012. At first, we thought that it would soon be over, and we could continue our lives as before. Unfortunately, it did not work out that way. Destruction with all its power fell upon us. There were so many stories of car bombings everywhere resulting in blood, death, scattered bodies and fear.

Armed extremists brought enmity amongst families. Brothers in the same family killed each other for the sake of radical beliefs, bringing great shame on humanity. Our family was living at the border line of the hostilities as we heard the voices of radicals coming from behind the walls saying, "Get ready; we're here to cut off the heads of Christians from their bodies." We shivered in fear, and it nearly drove us mad to have to listen to their taunting day after day.

In late August of 2012, we fled to a safer region and waited, but things only became worse. They started throwing bombs into our area which killed many families. With this, my father could not go to work any longer, since the area was no longer safe. He had two small shops where he worked on plastic molds and casting. At first the militant radicals robbed his store but later destroyed it completely.

During the next two very long years the situation went from bad to worse. We always had to walk about cautiously because of snipers. They spared no one's children, elderly people or even pet animals. People mourned, crying for their loved ones whom they had lost, but no one could comfort them. Our daughter was a student at the local university studying nursing, and when the radicals bombed the university, many students died. The sight of so many running about and bleeding was horrifying. During this time, we did not hear from our daughter for many hours, though by God's grace she was one of the survivors. Then the extremists closed all the exits of the city, so that there was no food, no water, no electricity, and no medicine. They threatened people by every means, so that everyone inside the city lost hope and thought it would be the end.

In 2014 as the world was preparing to celebrate Palm Sunday, our neighborhood suffered heavy bombardment. With this, our nerves collapsed, and we decided we would have to flee the city. Fortunately, some friends in another place opened their doors for us. But during the presidential election, fire bombs were continually being thrown, and many cities were set ablaze. We could hear the sound of the ambulances but feared to come out of our shelters. There was a terrible massacre in which we lost many friends and neighbors. Blown up bodies lay strewn over the stones of the ruins. The tears that flowed reflected how downcast our souls were.

By June of 2014, we left the country for good. At first, we travelled to a nearby country where we stayed for three months before a family member invited us to still another country. We stayed there for three long years trying to survive, but it was hopeless as we had no work. So, we had to move still again to another country in the Middle East where until this day we are trying to make a meager living and survive.

We would like to share with you lessons that we, as Christians in the Middle East, learned through all our suffering:

1. Throughout our crisis, His presence has been our hiding place.
2. When walking by faith with no clear destination in sight, we found we could trust Him and that He is the best captain ever.
3. We learned never to worry about the future and never cling to yesterday, for He is in complete control of the details of our lives.
4. Finally, we learned that everything we own is not ours, yet heavenly blessings go with us when we are moving in His direction.

Yes, we live in a world that is full of evil and suffering. Yet the question screams at us: *do we really have to live in a world like this?* Is the problem with God? Or is there a better explanation? That God has allowed evil to exist within His creation is rather obvious, but He is not the cause of that evil. In fact, at the time of the original creation, God warned the first couple that they were not to know evil.

“But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die” (Gen 2:17).

This verse presumes that *evil* already existed before the creation of the first man and woman. The immediate appearance of the serpent (Satan in disguise) with the garden scene ties the propagation of evil back to his diabolical intentions and schemes. Yet the first couple’s disobedience allowed the presence of evil to disrupt God’s created order, and it did not take long before the first murder occurred when Cain killed his brother Abel. After several generations, we read that evil had contaminated God’s creation so profusely that God decided to destroy the earth by a flood, sparing only Noah and those with him:

“But the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind had become great on the earth. Every inclination of the thoughts of their minds was only evil all the time” (Gen 6:5).

Despite the worldwide flood of Noah’s day, evil was not eliminated, for it was embedded in the fiber of every man and woman’s soul (Gen 8:21). Each person was born a sinner with the capacity for doing great evil. Only through the redeeming grace of God and walking in the way of the Lord could one rise above his own inherent evil. The story of the remainder of the Bible, then, is the story of conflict between God and Satan, between good and evil. God has allowed both Satan and evil to exist in His creation, because ultimately, they serve a good purpose. Among other reasons, this will allow God to show the indescribable love He has for all mankind as Jesus dies for the sins of everyone on the cross. Second, as mankind observes how destructive the presence of Satan and evil are in God’s creation, they will agree with God that evil should not and cannot be allowed to co-exist in His kingdom. They will also understand why God ultimately must banish evil, Satan, and all those aligned with him from His presence for all eternity.

QUESTION 1

The origin of evil goes back before the creation of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. *True or False?*

QUESTION 2

Which of the following are valid reasons as to why God would allow evil to exist in His creation?
Select all that apply

- A. Because there is evil and people are sinners, this will allow God to show His incredible love for mankind when Jesus (the Creator) dies for their sins on the cross.
- B. There was a debate among the angels about whether evil should be allowed, and they made the decision to allow evil.
- C. God allowed evil, so that ultimately He could prove He was stronger than Satan.
- D. By allowing evil to exist throughout history and to witness how terrible it is, mankind will come to understand that Satan and evil must ultimately be banished from God's creative realm.

Until the time when God makes a new heaven and new earth, we who are part of God's family are called to separate ourselves from evil. The author of Proverbs writes in Proverbs 14:16,

“A wise person is cautious and **turns from evil**,
but a fool throws off restraint and is overconfident.”

When one becomes a Christian, he gradually learns why a wise person turns from evil, but he also must learn *how* one can effectively do so. As we study the New Testament, we come to understand that God has given us the Holy Spirit within, so that by walking in the Spirit we can have victory over the flesh within, and thus not be dominated by evil desires.

QUESTION 3

As New Testament believers, we recognize that we need the help of the _____ if we are to have success in our battle with the flesh and overcoming evil desires.

Because there is evil in God's creation, there is suffering. In some cases, this is *general or undeserved suffering* that all mankind experiences, regardless of one's relationship to God. Examples of this are natural disasters, animal attacks, and disease. There is also *societal suffering*, that is, suffering because of evil in society in general, regarding which, one may or may not have much personal influence. For instance, evil desires within man are ultimately the cause of war in which multitudes suffer. There is also *deserved suffering* that one brings upon himself. For instance, if one steals something that does not belong to him, there is a good chance (according to the laws in most countries) that he will be punished for his crime. Then there is *Christian suffering*, the harassment or persecution that one experiences simply because he or she is a disciple of Christ who names Jesus as Lord and Savior. It is this last form of suffering that will be the focus of this course and of our study in 1 Peter. Simply put, we who are Christians live in a world that is hostile to our faith in Christ. This hostility is rooted in Satan's rebellion against God, and it is perpetrated by those who have been blinded by Satan's devious schemes and lies.

QUESTION 4

Which of the following is *not* one of the categories of suffering discussed above?

- A. General (or undeserved) suffering.
- B. Christian suffering.
- C. International suffering.
- D. Societal suffering.
- E. Deserved suffering.

QUESTION 5



Meditate for a moment on Proverbs 14:16. As you reflect upon your country and society, where do you see an example of evil for which you need to apply the truth of this verse? In your Life Notebook, describe the evil situation. How does this affect you? Why is it important to “turn from evil”?

Topic 2: The Origin of Evil in Satan’s Rebellion

In the previous topic, we saw that the problem of evil and suffering stems from the devious work carried out by one called Satan, and that the first couple were deceived by his trickery in the garden of Eden. But where did this one we call “Satan” come from? Did God create him evil? If so, is God ultimately guilty of the evil and suffering we see in the world? *Before answering these questions, we will pause to consider a true story of a Christian living in West Africa and the suffering he has had to experience.*¹



A Testimony from a Christian in West Africa

Mobo was known throughout his region of West Africa as the single most-feared anti-Christian zealot, wanting nothing but to punish Christians in the most brutal way possible.

Suddenly one evening, in the middle of ranting to his wives, he slumped onto their living room floor fast asleep. Five minutes later he woke, asking where the man in gleaming white had gone. “He wants me to follow Him, and I must. He said His name is Jesus.”

Four times in the next two weeks Mobo walked nearly three hours each way to the home of the Christian leader he once persecuted. He sought not to kill, but to be counseled.

After realizing his story was genuine, the believers meeting in the house taught him from the Bible. He was baffled that God would forgive him for his gruesome deeds, but upon hearing the gospel, he received Jesus and His gift of forgiveness.

Only two weeks after his conversion, Mobo was captured by his former men, interrogated, and bribed with money, a new wife, possessions ... anything a man could want. He refused, and instead boldly declared the truth of the gospel to them.

Despite being beaten and tortured, he fearlessly proclaimed his story—he’d met Jesus, Jesus forgave him, and Jesus loves them. The zealots were stunned and furious, thinking he was demon-possessed.

When their magic spells against him failed, they sought to kill him. Over the course of 15 months, Mobo escaped more arson attempts to kill him; was severely beaten, injured, and hospitalized for weeks on end. Yet he refused to deny Jesus.

Mobo is not safe today. He is separated from his family and fighting daily for his life. But more than that, he fights for the God who forgave and saved him.

The Bible has a lot to say about Satan, and by studying the Bible we can safely conclude that God did not create Satan as an evil creature. Since God Himself is perfect and holy, everything He thinks and does is perfect and holy, including everything He has created. The name “Satan” (meaning “adversary”) was not

¹ Adapted from “Mobo: A modern-day apostle Paul,” *SIM Global* 161 (Feb 2019): 1-2.

the original name for this evil one. The Bible appears to address him as “O shining one [or ‘star of the morning’], son of the dawn” (Isa 14:12). The Hebrew term for “shining one” is *Hêlêl*, and when this was translated into the Latin Vulgate, it was rendered as *Lucifer* (the term for the morning star).

QUESTION 6

Satan was originally referred to as the “shining one” or “star of the morning.” *True or False?*

Furthermore, Ezekiel 28:14-15 gives us insight into his original nature. First, he was created as an angelic being (“you were the anointed cherub who covers;” Ezk 28:14, NASB). Second, he was created pure and blameless, but subsequently sinned. Ezekiel 28:15 tells us, “You were blameless in your behavior from the day you were created, until sin was discovered in you.” His sin was one of pride and thinking that he could be like God. He said, “I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High” (Isa 14:14; NASB). For this reason, the LORD God had to judge and condemn him. Later, in stating the qualifications for elders, Paul said, “and not a new convert, so that he will not become *conceited* [‘puffed up, prideful’] and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil” (1 Tim 3:6; NASB).

QUESTION 7

Satan has always existed as an evil, demonic being opposed to God. *True or False?*

The Bible has many names and ways of referring to him:

- Satan (53 times) – first in Job 1:6 – meaning “adversary”
- devil (34 times, but only in the NT) – meaning “slanderer, accuser”
- the serpent (reflecting his disguise in the garden) – Genesis 3:1; 2 Corinthians 11:3; Revelation 12: 9, 14, 15; 20:2
- dragon (depicting him as a terrifying creature) – Revelation chapters 12 and 13; 16:13; 20:2
- the tempter – Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5
- the evil one (10 times) – Matthew 13:19; 1 John 5:19
- the accuser of the brethren – Revelation 12:10
- the prince of the power of the air – Ephesians 2:2
- the god of this age (or world) – 2 Corinthians 4:4
- the ruler of this world – John 12:31; 16:11

QUESTION 8

Which of the following is *not* one of the ways that Satan is referred to in the Bible?

- A. The god of this world
- B. The tempter
- C. The Devil
- D. The Antichrist
- E. The accuser of the brethren

In addition to his own downfall, we understand from the Bible that he led a rebellion against God and influenced many other angelic beings to participate in this with him. Hence, Matthew 25:41 speaks of “the devil and his angels” (cf. Rev 12:9). Those angels who joined Satan (and were likewise judged) became known as “demons” (or fallen angels).

In short, Satan is the *arch-enemy* of God, and (knowing that his ultimate fate is in hell) his purpose is to do everything he can—while he can—to hinder, oppose, and prevent God from carrying out His purposes with mankind. He will lie, murder, steal, tempt, and attack believers. He is out to deceive people that God is not really just and loving. He tried to keep Jesus from going to the cross (Mt 4:1-11). He has enormous power in this age to direct the spread of evil and propagate ungodliness in society, which is why the Bible speaks of him as “the ruler of this world” (Jn 12:31; 16:11) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2). As such, he works to turn the leaders of nations against the LORD God (Ps 2:1) and causes the persecution of Christians (Acts 4:18-31; 8:1; 2 Tim 3:12). He blinds the minds of the unbelieving to keep them from believing the gospel (2 Cor 4:4). He torments the lives of Christians, causing discouragement and depression (2 Cor 1:8-9). He hinders the advancement of the gospel and the cause of missions (1 Thess 2:18). He works disunity in the church and disrupts the harmony between believers (Eph 4:3; Phil 4:2). Finally, he will try to prevent the return of Christ to establish His kingdom upon earth by raising up and empowering a false messiah known as the Antichrist or “lawless one” (2 Thess 2:8-10; Rev 13:2-4).

QUESTION 9

Match the verse references in the left column with the correct statement in the right column:

<i>Verse Reference</i>	<i>Statement</i>
2 Corinthians 4:4	All who want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
John 16:11	He blinds the minds of those who do not believe
2 Timothy 3:12	We wanted to come to you ... but Satan thwarted us.
1 Thessalonians 2:18	The ruler of this world has been condemned.

As we prepare for our study of 1 Peter with its theme of trials, persecutions and sufferings, we need to be able to see that ultimately this is part of the activity of Satan. Once we believe the gospel and take the side of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have made ourselves a “target” of Satan and an enemy that he is determined to crush. Thanks to our Lord Jesus, however, we know that we are on the winning side!

^{2:14} But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and who makes known through us the fragrance that consists of the knowledge of him in every place. ^{2:15} For we are a sweet aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing—^{2:16} to the latter an odor from death to death, but to the former a fragrance from life to life (2 Cor 2:14-16).

QUESTION 10



Having studied through Topic 2, is there any new insight you have learned about Satan? Why do you think it is important for Christians to have an understanding of Satan and how he works? Write your answers in your Life Notebook.

Topic 3: Job: An Early Suffering Saint of God

The book of Job gives us keen insight into the attitude of Satan toward God's people and his determination to afflict them and see them suffer.² By studying this book of the Old Testament, we can learn a lot about Satan, his motives, and how our sufferings fit into the sovereignty of an all-wise, all-powerful, and all-loving Creator God. The book also helps us better understand that righteous people sometimes suffer undeservedly. Before we look closer at the book of Job, we will pause to consider a true story of a Christian lady living in East Asia. Her spouse did not understand her faith in God, just as Job's spouse questioned his faith in God.



A Testimony from a Christian in East Asia

The following is a true story of how one Christian sister in East Asia had to endure ill-treatment at the hands of an unbelieving husband. But Christ-like love helped change the situation.

When I first became a Christian, my husband was very opposed to my my new-found faith. He would often beat me in an attempt to get me to renounce my faith. When I went to church, he would often lock me out of our house. One night he refused to let me in all night. The Lord gave me strength to persevere in following Christ despite his opposition.

One day, however, my husband became very sick. God gave me compassion for him despite the way he had treated me, and I lovingly cared for him for many months. As a result, God softened his heart, and he eventually put his faith in Christ.

Many Bible scholars think that the book of Job was one of the earliest books of the Old Testament (if not *the* oldest book). It tells the story of a man named Job who was a believer in the LORD God and who lived in a country called Uz (an uncertain location but outside the land of Canaan). He was very righteous, very wealthy and had a large family. The setting of the story is given in chapters one and two. At a time when the angelic beings came before the presence of God, Satan also came among them (Job 1:6). Satan made the accusation that Job did not really love and worship God because of who God was, but because of the benefits he received from God. That is, because God blessed Job and protected him. If these things were taken away (so Satan argued), Job would cease fearing God. So, Satan was allowed to afflict Job. He suffered the loss of his possessions and wealth, his children were killed, and Job himself was afflicted with boils over his whole body. Not only was Job utterly miserable, but even his wife ceased to support him. She taunted him, "Are you still holding firmly to your integrity? Curse God and die!" Throughout all this ordeal, Job did not blame God but instead worshiped Him (Job 1:20-22). Nevertheless, in his great misery and suffering, he did curse the day of his birth and lamented his woes (Job 3:1-26). He also raised the philosophical question of why man should even be born, if his lot was merely to suffer:

²⁰ "Why does God give light to one who is in misery, and life to those whose soul is bitter, ²¹ to those who wait for death that does not come, and search for it more than for hidden treasures,

²² who rejoice even to jubilation, and are exultant when they find the grave? (Job 3:20-22).

² For a helpful study on this topic, see Larry J. Waters, "Reflections on Suffering from the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (Oct-Dec 1997) 436-51.

QUESTION 11

The reason why God allowed Satan to attack Job was because Job had become too rich and consequently too proud. *True or False?*

Hearing of his sad condition, his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) came to comfort him. Although their intentions were good, their counsel only served to antagonize him. The problem was that Job was truly innocent of any wrongdoing, but his three friends were convinced that it was some sin he had committed that caused God to afflict him. They subscribed to what theologians call “retribution theology.” This theology assumes that if one lives righteously, then God will bless him; but if one sins, then God will punish. The problem with such a theology is that although it may sometimes be true, it is *not* universally true. Larry Waters explains how this false theology ties in with Job’s situation:

Satan basically asked the question, Is it love or is it self-serving greed that motivates a person to be righteous, to fear God, and to be separate from sin? Satan wrongly assumed that since God protected and blessed Job, greed was the foundation of his righteousness rather than Job’s personal intimate relationship based on love, trust, and fear of God (1:8-10; 2:3). Traditional wisdom reasoned that since God is in control of the world and because He is just, the only way wise people can maintain faith in Him is to see all blessing as evidence of goodness and righteousness and all suffering as evidence of unrighteousness and sin.³

QUESTION 12

Which of the following statements best describes “retribution theology”?

- A. All good gifts coming from God are due to His grace.
- B. Without exception, man either obeys God and is blessed, or he disobeys and is punished.
- C. Man is inherently a sinner, and therefore deserves nothing from God.
- D. If we practice “knocking and seeking,” God will answer our prayers and bless us.

Although Job’s friends were wrong (he had not done anything to deserve his suffering), as their dialogue advanced we find Job struggling with his view of God. He vigorously contended that he was innocent (which was true), but he felt that God was treating him like an enemy and that God owed him an explanation. Job even demanded that God answer him (see Job 31:35-37).

QUESTION 13

Job believed in his heart that he had done nothing to bring about his sad misfortune, and therefore God owed him an explanation. *True or False?*

Eventually a fourth friend named Elihu spoke. He avoided the faulty accusations that the first three counselors gave to Job. Instead he tried to help Job realize that he had been wrong in his attitude toward God. Elihu pointed out that Job had no right to demand that God give him an explanation. He asked, “Why do you contend against him, that he does not answer all a person’s words?” (Job 33:13). Did Job really want God to treat him according to what he deserved? If God were to do that, Job would be utterly devastated. If Job were truly wise, he would want God to deal with him based on *grace* rather than based on what he deserved.

³ Larry J. Waters, “Reflections on Suffering from the Book of Job,” 441.

Furthermore, Job needed to trust that God would never be guilty of any wrongdoing. Elihu pointed out, “Indeed, in truth, God does not act wickedly, and the Almighty does not pervert justice” (Job 34:12). Also, Job needed to accept that he was incapable of understanding God and the ways that God worked. Elihu reminded Job that God was beyond Job’s ability to understand. “Yes, God is great—beyond your knowledge! The number of his years is unsearchable” (Job 36:26). Since God’s wisdom, knowledge and power were so much beyond Job’s, then Job ought to trust that God would be wise enough to choose the best course of action ... even if it meant that Job would suffer in the process.

Finally, Elihu concluded,

²³ As for the Almighty, we cannot attain to him! He is great in power, but justice and abundant righteousness he does not oppress. ²⁴ Therefore people fear him, for he does not regard all the wise in heart.” (Job 37:23-24; the “wise in heart” means those who are wise in their own estimation).

QUESTION 14

In Elihu’s counsel, what things did he point out to Job? *Select all that apply.*

- A. Job had no right to demand that God give him an answer.
- B. God would never do anything that was wrong or sinful.
- C. Since God was beyond Job’s understanding, he should not think he could debate God.
- D. If Job did not cease from his arrogance, God would take away his life.

Larry Waters (445) points out the wisdom of Elihu’s counsel:

Elihu presented a totally different perspective on suffering from that of the three. He said Job’s suffering was not because of past sin, but was designed to keep him from continuing to accept a sinful premise for suffering, to draw him closer to God, to teach him that God is sovereignly in control of the affairs of life, and to show him that God does reward the righteous, but only on the basis of His love and grace.

In chapters 38–41 of the book, we finally hear from God. When God spoke, however, he did not address Job’s suffering directly during his discourse nor did He answer Job’s attack on His justice. Instead, God pointed out for Job’s consideration many of the incredible things He had done in His creation, even the extraordinary creatures He had made. This powerfully demonstrated that God’s power and knowledge are infinitely beyond that of Job’s. God did not owe Job an explanation for his suffering, but based on what Job did know about God, he should have been able to simply trust God. God can be counted on to do what is right and, rather than giving us what we deserve, to deal with us in grace! If there is suffering that comes along with this, then we can trust God that it is for the best.

QUESTION 15

When God replied to Job, He carefully and patiently explained why it was necessary for Job to suffer. *True or False?*

In the final chapter, following Job’s repentance of his faulty view of God, we see God’s amazing grace poured out on Job afresh. God restored to him more than he had lost. Larry Waters concluded (448), “Job’s prosperity was returned only after everyone involved understood that all blessing comes by God’s grace alone, not because of an individual’s piety nor because of accepting a retribution/recompense theology.” This lesson, then, helps prepare us for our study of 1 Peter and the matter of why we as Christians are left to often suffer at the hands of a godless society in which we live. Even when we do not know why God has allowed these things to happen to us, we can trust that He is wise enough, righteous enough, and loving enough to do what is best. He can be trusted!

QUESTION 16



Are you or someone you know having to suffer, and yet you do not understand why? Perhaps you even feel frustrated with God. How can you *apply* what God taught Job in chapters 38–41 to your situation? Write your answers in your Life Notebook.

Topic 4: Persecution and the Challenge of Discipleship

In the previous three topics, we have reflected on the problem of evil and suffering. We have noted its origin in Satan and the rebellion he continues to lead against God’s kingdom. We also considered how Satan instigated an attack upon Job’s life which led to our gaining tremendous insight into the relationship between God and His people. God is absolutely righteous in His dealings with us, all in accordance with grace. We can trust Him who is all-wise and all-loving, even when unjust suffering comes our way that we do not deserve. This final topic of Lesson One will consider the matter of persecution that we, as Christians, may have to go through as we await our Savior’s return. Persecution for being a follower of Christ is something we must be prepared to face.



A Testimony from a Young Christian in Iran

The following is a true story of Hamid (not his real name), a young believer from the country of Iran.

For youth in Iran, following Jesus comes with a cost. “**All of them are discriminated against if it’s discovered that they are Christians,**” says Hamid, a Christian in his twenties who supports the house church movement in Iran. “Some youth have to deal with stronger forms of persecution—their families don’t agree with their new faith and are violent toward them.”

Hamid had to leave Iran at age 15. His family was involved in ministry among Muslim-background believers, which led to serious threats directed at his father. Living abroad, he is in regular contact with young Iranian believers through internet and secret meetings.

Additionally, Christians who are part of unregistered churches face the constant threat of raids and arrests. “After an arrest, the whole church is startled,” Hamid explains. “The arrested persons can’t come back to church because they will jeopardize the security of the whole church. This means that young people often have to say goodbye to people they have grown to feel connected with. Sometimes, their whole church ceases to exist.”

And yet, Hamid sees God doing amazing things among the young Christians of Iran. “There are three things that always inspire me about the youth in Iran,” Hamid says. “First, their passion for the Lord and how important this relationship with the Lord is to them. Second, I am always amazed by the level of and questions they ask. Finally, most of them have a vision in their mind and are happy to pay the price to move toward their vision.”

One of the more difficult things about being a Christian is that we must be prepared to suffer for our faith, and for some, maybe even to be martyred. This is even truer for those living outside the “Western world,” though even in western countries the enormous cultural shift in recent decades has brought about a significant diminishment of Christian freedoms and an attack upon our faith by the secular media and academic world.

The Bible has a lot to say about persecution and suffering for Christ. Jesus repeatedly challenged those who followed Him that they must be prepared for this. A classic example is found in Jesus' remarks in Matthew 5:10-12 from the Sermon on the Mount:

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. ¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad because your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way.

The Apostle Paul—one who had suffered much in his service to Jesus—penned these words for the Christians at Philippi (keep in mind that Paul was beaten and thrown in jail at Philippi; Acts 16:22-24):

²⁹ For it has been granted to you not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are encountering the same conflict that you saw me face and now hear that I am facing. (Phil 1:29-30).

The New Testament has so many references to Christian suffering and persecution that we cannot even begin to consider them all here. But you will find further help in Lesson 10 of the BEE course on *The Christian Life*. Lesson 10 is entitled, “Trusting God when Life Hurts: Making Sense of Suffering.” If you have already taken that course, you might wish to review that material. That lesson has five topics that are very helpful to Christians who are suffering:

- Topic 1: The Causes of Suffering
- Topic 2: The Dangers of Suffering
- Topic 3: How God Uses Suffering
- Topic 4: Ministering to the Suffering
- Topic 5: Preparing for Suffering

Christians have suffered through the ages, and that is certainly no less true today. In fact, some have estimated that there have been more Christians martyred for Christ since 1900 than in all previous centuries combined. In a 2001 publication entitled “World Christian Trends AD 30-AD 2200” (published by William Carey Library), the authors present evidence for the startling conclusion that, over the 20 centuries of the Christian faith, some 70 million believers have been murdered for the Christian faith and hence are called martyrs. They define Christian martyrs as “believers in Christ who have lost their lives prematurely, in situations of witness, as a result of human hostility” (p 228). Elsewhere, Glenn Penner writes, “There is a clear scriptural link between persecution and discipleship. Indeed, there can be no discipleship without persecution; to follow Christ is to join Him in a cross-carrying journey of reconciling the world to the Father.”⁴

To study 1 Peter is to study a book of the Bible meant to prepare us for the hard calling of suffering and persecution as a committed disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. All of us who claim to be Christians must ask ourselves this question: “Am I willing to suffer—perhaps even be martyred—because of the faith I profess in Jesus Christ?” This takes us to the essence of *true discipleship*. Are we willing to totally surrender our will to Jesus, trusting Him in whatever may come our way, even if we must pay a high price to be faithful to Him? That is a tough question, but it is that level of commitment that He wants from each one of us.

⁴ Glenn Penner, “A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship,” in *Sorrow & Blood; Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom*, ed. W. D. Taylor, A. van der Meer, and R. Reimer (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 72.

²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ²⁵ “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. (Mt 16:24-25).

These words were spoken in response to Peter’s objection to Jesus’ announcement that He was going to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed. Jesus was telling Peter and the other disciples that if they really were serious about wanting to follow Him, they would have to deny themselves and take up their cross. That is, they would have to give up whatever agenda for their life they might have had to accept what God wanted of them (= denying self), and would need to be prepared to suffer, perhaps even be martyred, in doing His will (= taking up their cross). That is what they must do to “save” their life. This latter statement in verse 25, however, is not talking about salvation from the penalty of sins. Only Jesus can do that for us. Rather, “to save our life” means to come out victorious in the day when we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵ It is to be commended by Him for being a faithful disciple rather than His being ashamed of us, and receiving from Him the rewards He has promised to those who are faithful (compare Mk 8:38).

QUESTION 17

What things did Jesus demand of faithful disciples in Matthew 16:24? *Select all that apply.*

- A. They would need to deny themselves (give up their own agenda for God’s).
- B. They would need to take up their cross (prepared to suffer and possibly be martyred).
- C. They would need to forsake all their earthly possessions and live a simple life.
- D. They would need to follow Jesus.

The sad news is that suffering and persecution of Christians are on the rise in most countries around the world. In 2018, the Pew Research Center released a carefully documented study of 198 countries with statistics showing increased government restrictions on religion and social hostilities:

In total in 2016, 83 countries (42%) had high or very high levels of **overall restrictions** on religion – whether resulting from government actions or from hostile acts by private individuals, organizations and social groups – up from 80 (40%) in 2015 and 58 (29%) in 2007.⁶

QUESTION 18

The Pew Research Center reported that in the year 2016, 83 countries had high or very high levels of restrictions on religion. *True or False?*

More recently, Open Doors released its annual “World Watch List” of the top 50 countries where it is most dangerous to be a Christian.⁷ The two most populous countries of the world are on that list and have risen higher on the list than in previous years. Each of these countries is home to more than a billion people. Of course, there are many other countries of the world where Christians face persecution, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. Looking at the numbers, 245 million Christians in the top 50 countries in the World Watch List are expected to face high levels of persecution in the coming

⁵ For more discussion on this difficult verse, see “Topic 2: Requirements of a True Disciple” in Lesson 7 of the BEE course *Following the Master*.

⁶ “Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion in 2016,” published by the Pew Research Center, June 2018. Available online at < <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/21/global-uptick-in-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2016/>>.

⁷ “World Watch List 2019; The 50 Countries Where It’s Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus,” published by Open Doors and available online at < <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/2019-world-watch-list-report>>.

year. Also, as many as 4,136 Christians were murdered last year because of their faith, while 1,266 churches or Christian buildings were attacked.

QUESTION 19

According to Open Doors' "World Watch List 2019," 245 thousand Christians in the top 50 countries on its list are expected to face high levels of persecution in the coming year.

True or False?

Also to be noted is what the report describes as the "shocking reality of persecution against women." According to the report,

"In many places, they experience a 'double persecution' — one for being a Christian and one for being a woman. Even in the most restricted circumstances, gender-specific persecution is a key means of destroying the minority Christian community. This kind of persecution is difficult to assess because it is complex, violent and hidden — in many cultures where women are specifically targeted, it is difficult if not impossible to report accurate numbers."

As saddening as it is to consider the topic of Christian persecution, the good news is that the church of Jesus Christ has *never* been defeated because of suffering. History testifies that it has often been in her most difficult and painful hours that the church has advanced the most. One of the great hymns of the Christian faith in English is "The Church's One Foundation." Consider stanzas four and five of that song.

4 The church shall never perish!
Her dear Lord, to defend,
to guide, sustain, and cherish,
is with her to the end;
tho' there be those that hate her
and false sons in her pale,
against the foe or traitor
she ever shall prevail.

5 'Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation
of peace for evermore;
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious
shall be the church at rest.

Those who take up the mantel of committed discipleship—no matter what their sufferings—will one day rejoice in victory as the Lord Jesus Christ returns to banish the evil one and inaugurate His blessed kingdom. To that day may we all look with hearts of faith!

QUESTION 20



Take a few moments to reflect again on the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 5:10-12. What consolations did Jesus have to offer for those who were persecuted, insulted or falsely accused on His account? Do you find His words to be helpful? Why or why not? Write your answers in your Life Notebook

Lesson 1 Answers to Questions

QUESTION 1: True

QUESTION 2: Answers “A” and “D” are both correct.

- A. Because there is evil and people are sinners, this will allow God to show His incredible love for mankind when Jesus (the Creator) dies for their sins on the cross.
- D. By allowing evil to exist throughout history and to witness how terrible it is, mankind will come to understand that Satan and evil must ultimately be banished from God’s creative realm.

QUESTION 3

Holy Spirit

QUESTION 4

- C. International suffering.

QUESTION 5: *your answer.*

QUESTION 6: True

QUESTION 7: False

QUESTION 8

- D. The Antichrist

QUESTION 9

<i>Verse Reference</i>	<i>Statement</i>
2 Corinthians 4:4	He blinds the minds of those who do not believe.
John 16:11	The ruler of this world has been condemned.
2 Timothy 3:12	All who want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.
1 Thessalonians 2:18	We wanted to come to you ... but Satan thwarted us.

QUESTION 10: *your answer.*

QUESTION 11: False

QUESTION 12

- B. Without exceptions, man either obeys God and is blessed, or he disobeys and is punished.

QUESTION 13: True

QUESTION 14: Answers “A,” “B” and “C” are all true.

- A. Job had no right to demand that God give him an answer.
- B. God would never do anything that was wrong or sinful.
- C. Since God was beyond Job’s understanding, he should not think he could debate God.

QUESTION 15: False

QUESTION 16: *Your answer*

QUESTION 17: Answers “A,” “B” and “D” are all true.

- A. They would need to deny themselves (give up their own agenda for God’s).
- B. They would need to take up their cross (prepared to suffer and possibly be martyred).
- D. They would need to follow Jesus.

QUESTION 18: True

QUESTION 19: False

QUESTION 20: *Your answer*